

## Time-Varying Rates of Return and the Yield Curve

### When Annualized Rates of Return Vary by Term

In this chapter, we will make the world a little more complex and a lot more realistic, although we will still assume perfect foresight and perfect markets. The only assumption that we will now abandon is that rates of return per unit of time are the same no matter what the investment time horizon (the term) is. In the previous chapters, the interest rate was the same every period — for example, if a 30-year bond offered an interest rate of 5% per annum, so did a 1-year bond. But this is not the case in the real world. Rates of return usually vary with the length of time an investment requires.

The [U.S. Treasury Department Resource Center](#) informs you of this fact every day. For example, on Dec 31, 2021, a U.S. Treasury paid 0.39% *per annum* for a payment to be delivered in one year (Dec 31, 2022), but 1.90% *per annum* for a payment to be delivered in 30 years (Dec 31, 2051):

	<u>In Percent Per Annum</u>										
	1mo	3mo	6mo	1yr	2yr	3yr	5yr	7yr	10yr	20yr	30yr
12/31/2021	0.06	0.06	0.19	0.39	0.73	0.97	1.26	1.44	1.52	1.94	1.90

Is this stuff that just bond traders need to know? Not at all. In fact, this stuff matters to you personally. Have you ever wondered why your bank's three-month Certificate of Deposit (CD) offered only 0.30-0.40% *per annum* (which it did on this day), while its five-year CD offered 1.1-1.3% *per annum*? Which should you choose? Why? And how does inflation matter (which just shot up to a 40-year high of 8% per year in early 2022)?

CEOs must also know how to compare what they should have to pay when their investors are willing to give them money for a project that promises returns in 1 year vs. returns in 30 years or many times in between. If the U.S. Treasury and banks have to offer higher rates for lengthier investment return periods, surely so do firms!

In this chapter, you will learn how to work with time-dependent rates of return and inflation. In addition, this chapter contains an (optional) section that explains the U.S. Treasury yield curve.

## 5.1 Working with Time-Varying Rates of Return

In the real world, rates of return usually differ depending on when the payments are made. For example, the interest rate next year could be higher or lower than it is this year. Moreover, it is often the case that long-term bonds offer different interest rates than short-term bonds. You must be able to work in such an environment, so let me give you the tools.

### Compounding Different Rates of Return

Fortunately, when working with time-varying interest rates, all the tools you have learned in previous chapters remain applicable (as promised). In particular, compounding still works exactly the same way. For example, what is the two-year holding rate of return if the rate of return is 20% in the first year and 30% in the second year? (The latter is sometimes called the reinvestment rate.) You can determine the two-year holding rate of return from the two 1-year rates of return using the same compounding formula as before:

(Omitted eq)

Subtract 1, and the answer is a total two-year holding rate of return of 56%. If you prefer it shorter,

(Omitted eq)

The calculation is not conceptually more difficult, but the notation is. You have to subscript not just the interest rates that begin now, but also the interest rates that begin in the future. Therefore, most of the examples in this chapter must use two subscripts: one for the time when the money is deposited, and one for the time when the money is returned. Thus,  $r_{1,2}$  describes an interest rate from time 1 to time 2. Aside from this extra notation, the compounding formula is still the very same multiplicative “one-plus formula” for each interest rate (subtracting 1 at the end).

You can also compound to determine holding rates of return in the future. For example, if the 1-year rate of return is 30% from year 1 to year 2, 40% from year 2 to year 3, and 50% from year 3 to year 4, then what is your holding rate of return for an investment beginning next year for three years? It is

(Omitted eq)

Subtracting 1, you see that the three-year holding rate of return for an investment that takes money *next* year (not today!) and returns money in 4 years (appropriately called  $r_{1,4}$ ) is 173%. Let's be clear about the timing. For example, say it was midnight of December 31, 2021, right now. This would be year 0 (i.e., time 0). Time 1 would be midnight December 31, 2022, and this is when you would invest your \$1. Three years later, on midnight December 31, 2025 (time 4), you would receive your original dollar plus an additional \$1.73, for a total return of \$2.73. Interest rates that begin right now — where the first subscript would be 0 — are usually called spot rate[spot rates]. Interest rates that begin in the future are usually called forward rate[forward rates].

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Annualized Rates of Return

Time-varying rates of return create a new complication that is best explained by an analogy. Is a car that travels 163,680 yards in 93 minutes fast or slow? It is not easy to say, because you are used to thinking in “miles per sixty minutes,” not in “yards per ninety-three minutes.” It makes sense to translate speeds into miles per hour for the purpose of comparing them. You can even do this for sprinters, who run for only 10 seconds. Speeds are just a standard measure of the rate of accumulation of distance per unit of time.

The same issue applies to rates of return: A rate of return of 58.6% over 8.32 years is not as easy to compare to other rates of return as a rate of return per year. Therefore, most rates of return are quoted as annualized rate[annualized rates]. The average annualized rate of return is just a convenient unit of measurement for the rate at which money accumulates — a “sort-of-average” measure of performance. Of course, when you compute such an annualized rate of return, you do not mean that the investment earned the same annualized rate of return of, say, 5.7% each year — just as the car need not have traveled at 60 mph (163,680 yards in 93 minutes) each instant.

If you were earning a total three-year holding rate of return of 173% over the three-year period, what would your *annualized* rate of return be? The answer is not the average rate of return of  $173\%/3 \approx 57.7\%$ , because if you earned 57.7% per year, you would have ended up with  $1.577^3 - 1 \approx 292\%$ , not 173%. This incorrect answer of 57.7% ignores the *compounded interest on the interest* that you would earn after the first and second years. Instead, to compute the annualized rate of return, you need to find a single hypothetical annual rate of return that, if you received it each and every year, would give you a three-year holding rate of return of 173%.

How can you compute this? Call this hypothetical annual rate that you would have to earn each year for three years  $r_{\overline{3}}$  (note the bar above the 3 to denote *annualized*) in order to end up with a holding rate of return of 173%. To find  $r_{\overline{3}}$ , solve the equation

(Omitted eq)

or, for short,

(Omitted eq)

In our example, the holding rate of return  $r_{0,3}$  is known (173%) and the annualized rate of return  $r_{\overline{3}}$  is unknown. Earning the same rate ( $r_{\overline{3}}$ ) three years in a row should result in a holding rate of return of 173%. It is a “smoothed-out” rate of return of the three years’ rates of return. Think of it as a hypothetical, single, *constant-speed* rate at which your money would have ended up at the same 173% as it did with the three consecutive actual rates of return of 30%, 40%, and 50%. The correct solution for  $r_{\overline{3}}$  is obtained by computing the third root of 1 plus the total holding rate of return:

(Omitted eq)

Confirm with your calculator that  $r_{\overline{3}} \approx 39.76\%$ ,

(Omitted eq)

In sum, if you invested money at a rate of 39.76% per annum for 3 years, you would end up with a total three-year holding rate of return of 173%. As is the case here, for very long periods, the order of magnitude of the annualized rate will often be so different from the holding rate that you will intuitively and immediately register whether the quantity  $r_{0,3}$  or  $r_{\frac{1}{3}}$  is meant. In the real world, very few rates of return, especially over long horizons, are quoted as holding rates of return. Almost all rates are quoted in annualized terms instead.

### Begin Important

The total holding rate of return over  $t$  years, called  $r_{0,t}$ , is translated into an annualized rate of return, called  $r_{\frac{1}{t}}$ , by taking the  $t$ -th root:

(Omitted eq)

Compounding the annualized rate of return over  $t$  years yields the total holding rate of return. **End Important**

You also will often need to compute annualized rates of return from payoffs on your own. For example, what annualized rate of return would you expect from a \$100 investment today that promises a return of \$240 in 30 years? The first step is computing the total holding rate of return. Take the ending value (\$240) minus your beginning value (\$100), and divide by the beginning value. Thus, the total 30-year holding rate of return is

(Omitted eq)

The annualized rate of return is the rate  $r_{\frac{1}{30}}$ , which, if compounded for 30 years, offers a 140% rate of return,

(Omitted eq)

Solve this by taking the 30th root,

(Omitted eq)

Subtracting 1, you see that a return of \$240 in 30 years for an initial \$100 investment is equivalent to a 2.96% annualized rate of return.

In the context of rates of return, compounding is similar to adding, while annualizing is similar to averaging. If you earn 1% twice, your compounded rate is 2.01%, similar to the rates themselves added (2%). In contrast, your annualized rate of return is 1%, similar to the average rate of return of  $2.01\%/2 = 1.005\%$ . The difference comes from the interest on the interest.

Now assume that you have an investment that doubles in value in the first year and then falls back to its original value. What would its average rate of return be? Doubling from, say, \$100 to \$200 is a rate of return of +100%. Falling back to \$100 is a rate of return of  $(\$100 - \$200)/\$200 = -50\%$ . Therefore, the average rate of return would be  $[+100\% + (-50\%)]/2 = +25\%$ .

*But you have not made any money!* You started with \$100 and ended up with \$100. If you compound the returns, you get the answer of 0% that you were intuitively expecting:

(Omitted eq)

It follows that the annualized rate of return  $r_2$  is also 0%. Conversely, an investment that produces +20% followed by -20% has an average rate of return of 0% but leaves you with a loss:

(Omitted eq)

For every \$100 of your original investment, you now have only \$96. The average rate of return of 0% does not reflect this loss. Both the compounded and therefore the annualized rates of return do tell you that you had a loss:

(Omitted eq)

If you were an investment advisor and quoting your historical performance, would you rather quote your average historical rate of return or your annualized rate of return? (Hint: The industry standard is to quote the average rate of return, not the annualized rate of return!) 4]pg:compoundingMore about how arithmetic returns are “too high” in normally-distributed stock returns

Make sure to solve the following questions to gain more experience with compounding and annualizing over different time horizons.

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## **Maturity, Duration, and Project Length**

We sometimes need summary statistics of how long a project (such as a bond) will last. The maturity is the simplest measure: the date of the very last payment.

However, you would probably not consider one project that pays \$1 million in one year and another \$1 million in 30 years to be equally long-term as a project that pays only \$2 million in 30 years — even though both have a 30 year maturity. Instead, the former seems more “like a 15-year project,” the latter more “like a 30-year project.” The duration measures this concept via the payment-weighted average of all “payout times.” This is easier to show than it is to verbalize. In the case of our former project with the two \$1-million payments, the total sum of all payments is \$2 million. Its duration is

(Omitted eq)

This project indeed has about a 15-year duration. (Incidentally, this is also the case for a project that pays \$1 every year for 30 years.) Now consider another project that pays relatively more early on, say \$100 in one year and \$1 in 30 years. Intuitively, it should have a shorter duration, and our measure captures this:

(Omitted eq)

It is easy to see that a zero bond would have a duration equal to its maturity.

One important variation in wide use is the Macauley Duration, which replaces the raw cash flow with its present value. The intent is to discount far-away payouts more, which thus further shortens measured duration. (After

all, earlier payments are worth relatively more.) A disadvantage of Macauley duration is that it can change when interest rates change.

For example, if the 1-year interest rate is 2% and the 30-year interest is 5%, the preceding project with only the two payments (\$100 next year and \$1 in 30 years) is worth  $\$100/1.02 + \$1/1.05^{30} \approx \$98.04 + \$0.23 = \$98.27$ . Its Macauley duration is therefore

(Omitted eq)

There are also other less common measures of duration. They all try to summarize different versions of *when* your “average” cash flow is going to occur.

### **Present Values with Time-Varying Interest Rates**

Let's proceed now to net present value with time-varying interest rates. What do you need to learn about the role of time-varying interest rates when computing NPV? The answer is essentially nothing new. You already know everything you need to know here. The net present value formula is still

(Omitted eq)

The only novelty is that you need to be more careful with your subscripts. You cannot simply assume that the multiyear holding returns (e.g.,  $1 + r_{0,2}$ ) are the squared 1-year rates of return  $((1 + r_{0,1})^2)$ . Instead, you must work with time-dependent costs of capital (interest rates). That's it.

For example, say you have a project with an initial investment of \$24 that pays \$20 in one year and \$16 in five years. Assume that the 1-year interest rate is 5% and the five-year annualized interest rate is 6% per annum. In this case,

(Omitted eq)

It follows that the project's total value *today* (time 0) is \$31.01. If the project costs \$24, its net present value is

(Omitted eq)

You can also rework a more involved project, similar to that in Table ]tbl:hypoproject1-ciHypothetical Project Cash Flows. Assume this project requires an appropriate annualized discount rate of 5% over one year, and 0.5% more for every subsequent year, so that the cost of capital reaches 7% annualized in the fifth year. The valuation method works the same way as it did in Table — you only have to be a little more careful with the interest rate subscripts. The project's value is thus

	Project	Annualized	Compound	Discount	Present
Time	Cash Flow	Rate	Rate	Factor	Value
t	$C_t$	$r_t$	$r_{0,t}$	$\frac{1}{1 + r_{0,t}}$	$PV(C_t)$
Today	−\$900	any		1.0000	−\$900.00
Y1	+\$200	5.0%	5.0%	0.9524	+\$190.48
Y2	+\$200	5.5%	11.3%	0.8985	+\$179.69
Y3	+\$400	6.0%	19.1%	0.8396	+\$335.85
Y4	+\$400	6.5%	28.6%	0.7773	+\$310.93
Y5	−\$100	7.0%	40.3%	0.7130	−\$71.30
Net Present Value (Sum):					+\$45.65

(Omitted solvenow)

## 5.2 Working With Inflation

Let's make our world even more realistic — and complex — by working out the effects of inflation. Inflation is the process by which the same good costs more in the future than it does today. With inflation, the price level is rising and thus money is losing its value. For example, if inflation is 100% and is equal across all goods, an apple that costs \$0.50 today will cost \$1 next year, a banana that costs \$2 today will cost \$4, and finance textbooks that cost \$200 today will cost \$400.

Inflation may or may not matter in a corporate context, depending on how contracts are written. If you ignore inflation and write a contract that promises to deliver bread for the price of \$1 next year, it is said to be in nominal terms — and you may have made a big mistake. The money you will be paid will be worth only half as much. You will only be able to buy one apple for each loaf of bread that you had agreed to sell for \$1, not the two apples that anyone else will enjoy. So this nominal interest rate to which you have agreed does not take inflation into account. On the other hand, you could write your contract in real terms (or inflation-indexed terms) today, in which case the inflationary price change would not matter. That is, you could build into your promised banana delivery price the inflation rate from today to next year. An example would be a contract that promises to deliver bananas at the rate of four apples per banana. If a contract is indexed to inflation, then inflation does not matter. However, in the United States inflation *can* indeed matter, because most contracts are in nominal terms and not inflation-indexed — and when a surprise (like the unexpected 2022 sharp inflation increase) occurs, it affects both borrowers and lenders. Therefore, you have to learn how to work with inflation.

What effect, then, does inflation have on returns? On (net) present values? This is our next subject.

## Measuring the Inflation Rate

The first important question is how you should define the inflation rate. Is the rate of change of the price of apples the best measure of inflation? What if apples (the fruit) become more expensive, but Apples (the computers) become less expensive? Defining inflation is actually rather tricky. To solve this problem, economists have invented *baskets* or *bundles* of goods and services that are deemed to be representative of some buyers. Economists then measure an average price change for these items. The official source of most inflation measures is the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), which determines the compositions of a number of common bundles (indexes) and publishes the average total price of these bundles on a monthly basis. The most prominent such inflation measure is a hypothetical bundle of average household consumption, called the Consumer Price Index (CPI). (The CPI components are roughly: housing 40%, food 20%, transportation 15%, medical care 10%, clothing 5%, entertainment 5%, others 5%.) The BLS offers inflation data at <https://www.bls.gov/cpi/>, and the *Wall Street Journal* prints the percent change in the CPI at the end of its regular column “Money Rates.”

In earlier editions of the book, the inflation rate was so low for many years that I had to resort to telling students that it was worth learning anyway, because the time would come when they would need these calculations again. (There were even some months during the Great Recession of 2008-9 with highly negative inflation rates, too — a situation called deflation!) The time for more inflation has come in the logistics holdups of Covid — the [BLS](#) reported an inflation rate of about 8%.

Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
CPI	203.1	211.4	211.4	217.3	220.5	227.2	231.2	234.7
Inflation		↘4.1%↑	↘-0.0%↑	↘2.8%↑	↘1.4%↑	↘3.1%↑	↘1.8%↑	↘1.5%↑
								↘0.7%↑
Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
CPI	236.3	237.8	242.6	247.7	252.5	258.2	261.6	280.2
Inflation		↘0.6%↑	↘2.0%↑	↘2.1%↑	↘1.9%↑	↘2.3%↑	↘1.3%↑	↘7.1%↑

A number of other indexes are also commonly used as inflation measures, such as the Producer Price Index (PPI) or the broader GDP Deflator. These indexes typically move in a manner very similar to that of the CPI. Over short periods, one expects these rates to move fairly close together (on average, not every month); but over longer periods, they can diverge. There are also more specialized bundles, such as computer or flash memory chip inflation indexes (their prices usually decline), or price indexes for particular regions.

(Omitted anecdote)



The official inflation rate is not just a number that mirrors reality — it is important in itself, because many contracts are specifically indexed to a particular inflation definition. For example, even if actual true inflation is zero, if the officially reported CPI rate is positive, the government must pay out more to Social Security recipients. The lower the official inflation rate, the less the government has to pay. You would therefore think that the government has the incentive to understate inflation. Strangely, this has not been the case. On the contrary, there are strong political interest groups that hinder the BLS from even fixing mistakes that everyone knows overstate the CPI — that is, corrections that would result in *lower* official inflation numbers. This is not a new insight. As early as 1996, the Boskin Commission, consisting of a number of eminent economists, found that the CPI overstated inflation by about 74 basis points per annum — a huge difference. The main reasons were and continue to be that the BLS has been tardy in recognizing the growing importance of such factors as effective price declines in the computer and telecommunications industries and the role of superstores such as Wal-Mart and Target.

Before we get moving, a final warning: **Begin Important**

The common statement “in today’s dollars” can be ambiguous. Most people mean “inflation-adjusted.” Some people mean present values (i.e., “compared to an investment in risk-free bonds”). When in doubt, ask! **End Important**

(Omitted solvenow)

## Real and Nominal Interest Rates

To work with inflation and to learn how you would properly index a contract for inflation, you first need to learn the difference between a nominal return and a real return. The nominal rate is what is usually quoted — a return that has not been adjusted for inflation. In contrast, the real rate of return somehow “takes out” inflation from the nominal rate in order to calculate a return “as if” there had been no price inflation to begin with. The real return reflects the fact that, in the presence of inflation, dollars in the future will have less purchasing power than dollars today. It measures your trade-off between present and future consumption, taking into account the change in prices.

Start with a simple exaggerated scenario: Assume that the inflation rate is 100% per year and you can buy a bond that promises a *nominal* interest rate of 700%. What is your *real* rate of return? To find out, assume that \$1 buys one apple today. With an inflation rate of 100%, you need \$2 next year to buy the same apple. Your gross return will be  $\$1 \cdot (1 + 700\%) = \$8$  for today’s \$1 of investment. But this \$8 will apply to apples costing \$2 each. Your \$8 will buy 4 apples, not 8 apples. Your real rate of return (1 apple yields 4 apples) is therefore

(Omitted eq)

For each dollar invested today, you will be able to buy only 300% more apples next year (not 700% more) than you could buy today. This is because inflation will reduce the purchasing power of your dollar by more than one half.

The correct formula to adjust for the inflation rate ( $\pi$ ) is again a “one-plus” type formula. In our example, it is

(Omitted eq)

Turning this formula around gives you the real rate of return,

(Omitted eq)

In plain English, a nominal interest rate of 700% is the same as a real interest rate of 300%, given an inflation rate of 100%.

### Begin Important

The relation between the nominal rate of return ( $r_{\text{nominal}}$ ), the real rate of return ( $r_{\text{real}}$ ), and the inflation rate ( $\pi$ ) is

(Omitted eq)

### End Important

As with compounding, if the rates are small, the mistake of just subtracting the inflation rate from the nominal interest rate to obtain the real interest rate is not too grave. For example, with our (30-year) 3% Treasury, if inflation were to remain at 0.7%, the correct real interest rate would be (about) 2.28% and not 2.30%:

(Omitted eq)

The difference between the correct rate and the approximation, i.e., the cross-term, is trivial, and easily swamped by measurement noise in the current inflation rate and uncertainty about future inflation rates. 1]pg:crosstermAdding or compounding interest rates, and the cross-term However, when inflation and interest rates are high — as they were, for example, in the United States in the late 1970s — then the cross-term can be important.

A positive time value of money — the same amount of money is worth more today than tomorrow — is only true for nominal quantities, not for real quantities. Only nominal interest rates are (usually) not negative. In the presence of inflation, real interest rates not only *can* be negative, but often *are* negative. For example, in December 2021, the one-month Treasury paid 0.06% per annum while the inflation rate was about 7%, implying a real interest rate of about  $-7\%$  per annum. Yikes 😬! Every dollar you invested in such U.S. Treasuries would be worth *less* in real purchasing power one month later. You would have ended up with more cash — but also with *less* purchasing power. Maybe you would have been better off spending the money instead?

(Omitted anecdote)

(Omitted solvenow)

## Inflation in Net Present Values

When it comes to inflation and net present value, there is a simple rule: Never mix apples and oranges. The beauty of NPV is that every project's cash flows are translated into the same units: today's dollars. Keep everything in the same units in the presence of inflation, so that this NPV advantage is not lost. When you use the NPV formula, always discount nominal cash flows with nominal discount rates, and real (inflation-adjusted) cash flows with real (inflation-adjusted) discount rates.

Let's return to our "apple" example. With 700% nominal interest rates and 100% inflation, the real interest rate is  $(1 + 700\%)/(1 + 100\%) - 1 = 300\%$ . What is the value of a project that gives 12 apples next year, given that apples cost \$1 each today and \$2 each next year?

There are two methods you can use:

1. Discount the nominal cash flow of 12 apples next year ( $\$2 \cdot 12 = \$24$ ) with the nominal interest rate. Thus, the 12 future apples are worth

(Omitted eq)

2. Discount the real cash flows of 12 apples next year with the real interest rate. Thus, the 12 future apples are worth

(Omitted eq)

in today's apples. Because an apple costs \$1 today, the 12 apples next year are worth \$3 today.

Both the real and the nominal methods arrive at the same NPV result. The opportunity cost of capital is that if you invest one apple today, you can quadruple your apple holdings by next year. Thus, a 12-apple harvest next year is worth 3 apples to you today. The higher nominal interest rates already reflect the fact that nominal cash flows next year are worth less than they are this year.

As basic as these calculations are, I have seen corporate managers first work out the real value of their goods in the future, and then discount them with nominal interest rates. Just don't!

### Begin Important

- Discount nominal cash flows with nominal interest rates.
- Discount real cash flows with real interest rates.

Either works. Never discount nominal cash flows with real interest rates, or vice-versa. **End Important**

If you want to see this in algebra, the reason that the two methods come to the same result is that the inflation rate cancels out,

(Omitted eq)

where  $N$  is the nominal cash flow,  $R$  is the real cash flow, and  $\pi$  is the inflation rate. Most of the time, it is easier to work in nominal quantities. Nominal interest rates are far more common than real interest rates, and you can simply use published inflation rates to adjust the future price of goods to obtain future expected nominal cash flows.

(Omitted solvenow)

## 5.3 U.S. Treasuries and the Yield Curve

It is now time to talk in more detail about the most important financial market in the world today: the market for bonds issued by the U.S. government to finance its [national debt](#).

These bonds are called Treasuries and are perhaps the simplest projects around. This is because, in theory, Treasuries cannot fail to pay and are thus risk-free. They promise to pay U.S. dollars, and the U.S.-controlled Federal Reserve has the right to print more U.S. dollars if it were ever to run out. Thus, there should be no uncertainty about repayment for Treasuries. (In contrast, some countries and U.S. states [like Illinois] borrow in currencies that they cannot themselves create. Therefore, they may well not have the money to repay and default.)

The shorthand “Treasury” comes from the fact that the debt itself is issued by the U.S. Treasury Department. There are three main types:

1. Treasury bill[Treasury bills] (often abbreviated as T-bill[T-bills]) have maturities of up to one year.
2. Treasury note[Treasury notes] have maturities between one and ten years.
3. Treasury bond[Treasury bonds] have maturities greater than ten years.

The 30-year bond is often called the long bond. Together, the three are usually just called Treasuries. Conceptually, there is really no difference among them. All are really just obligations issued by the U.S. Treasury. Indeed, there can be Treasury notes today that are due in 3 months — such as a 9-year Treasury note that was issued 8 years and 9 months ago. This note is really the same obligation as a 3-month Treasury bill that was just issued. Thus, we shall be (very) casual with name distinctions.

In late 2021, the United States federal government owed over [\\$23 trillion in U.S. Treasury obligations](#) (on a GDP of about \$17.5 trillion). With a population of 322 million, this debt translated to over \$71,000 per person. With 125 million households and 157 million full-time workers, the debt represented about \$150,000 per household or employed. (A worse problem, however, is that the United States has already promised benefits to future retirees that far exceed even this big number.) But the United States also has assets. It owns more than \$100 trillion in land, infrastructure, and mineral rights under the land.\*

After Treasuries are sold by the government, they are then actively traded in what is one of the most important — if not the most important — financial markets in the world today. It would not be uncommon for a dedicated bond trader to buy \$100 million of a Treasury note originally issued 10 years ago that has 5 years remaining, and 10 seconds later sell \$120 million of a three-year Treasury note issued 6 years ago. Large buyers and sellers of Treasuries

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\*Spending and debt is a bipartisan problem. Both Democrat and Republican administrations and Congresses have been profligate spenders, not expecting to have to pay it back themselves. They only ever become fiscally responsible and complain when they are in the opposition and the money is spent by the other party.

are easily found, and transaction costs are very low. Trading volume is huge: In 2021, it was about [\\$620 billion per trading day](#). Therefore, the annual trading volume in U.S. Treasuries — about  $252 \cdot \$500 \text{ billion} \approx \$130 \text{ trillion}$ , where 252 is the approximate number of trading days per year — was about an order of magnitude larger than the entire annual U.S. gross domestic product (GDP).

Who owns them? The U.S. Treasury [reports](#) that about half was owned by U.S. investors (including indirectly via trust funds and other government institutions); the other half was owned by foreigners (about \$15 trillion each). Japan and China hold about \$1.2 trillion each, i.e., lending money to the U.S. government as our largest creditors.

Interest rates on Treasuries change every moment, depending on their maturity terms. Fortunately, you already know how to handle time-varying rates of return, so we can now put your knowledge to the test. The principal tool for working with Treasury bonds is the yield curve (or term structure of interest rates or just the term structure). It is a graphical representation, where the time to maturity is on the X-axis and the annualized interest rates are on the Y-axis. There are also yield curves on non-Treasury bonds, but the Treasury yield curve is so prominent that unless clarified further, the yield curve should be assumed to mean investments in U.S. Treasuries. (A more precise name would be the “U.S. Treasuries yield curve.”) This yield curve is so important that most other debts in the financial markets, like mortgage rates or bank lending rates, are “benchmarked” relative to the Treasury yield curve. For example, if your firm wants to issue a five-year bond, your creditors will want to compare your interest rate to that offered by equivalent Treasuries, and often will even describe your bond as offering “x basis points above the equivalent Treasury.”

(Omitted solvenow)

## Yield Curve Shapes

Figure ?? shows some actual historical yield curves.

(Omitted fig)

Yield curves are commonly classified into four basic shapes:

**1. Flat:** There is little or no difference between annualized short-term and long-term rates. A flat yield curve is basically the scenario that was the subject of the previous chapter. It means you can simplify  $(1 + r_{0,t}) \approx (1 + r)^t$ .

**2. Upward-sloping (“normal”):** Short-term rates are lower than long-term rates. This is the most common shape. It means that longer-term interest rates are higher than shorter-term interest rates. Figure ?? below will plot how it changed over history. Since 1934, the steepest yield curve (the biggest difference between the long-term and the short-term Treasury rates) occurred in October 1992, when the long-term interest rate was 7.3% and the short-term interest rate was 2.9% — just as the economy pulled out of the recession of 1991. With active intervention by the Federal Reserve, 2004 and 2009 saw similarly high spreads. When Covid struck in January 2020, the yield curve had returned to flat (with short-term rates rising and long-term rates dropping to about 3% per annum). At this point, the Fed pushed the short rate to zero. Thus, it has been “normal” since Covid.

**3. Downward-sloping (“inverted”):** Short-term rates exceed long-term rates.

**4. Humped:** Short-term rates and long-term rates exceed medium-term rates.

Inverted and humped yield curves are relatively rare.

(Omitted anecdote)

If you want to undertake your own research, you can find historical interest rates at the St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank at <https://research.stlouisfed.org/fred>. There are also the Treasury Management Pages at <http://www.tmpages.com/>. Or you can look at [SmartMoney.com](http://SmartMoney.com) for historical yield curves. [PiperJaffray.com](http://PiperJaffray.com) has the current yield curve — as do many other financial sites and newspapers. [Finance.yahoo.com/bonds](http://Finance.yahoo.com/bonds) provides not only the Treasury yield curve but also yield curves for many other types of bonds.

### An Example: The Yield Curve on December 31, 2021

Let’s focus on working with one particular yield curve. Figure ?? shows the Treasury yields on December 31, 2021. This yield curve had the most common upward slope. The curve tells you that if you had bought a 3-month Treasury at the end of the day on December 31, 2021, your annualized interest rate would have been 0.06% per annum. (A \$100 investment would turn into  $\$100 \cdot (1 + 0.06\%)^{1/4} \approx \$100 \cdot 1.00015 \approx \$100.015$  on March 31, 2022.) If you had bought a thirty-year bond, your annualized interest rate would have been 1.90% per annum, resulting in a payment of \$175.88 on December 2051 for a \$100 investment.

Sometimes it is necessary to determine an interest rate for a bond that is not listed. This is usually done by interpolation. For example, if you had wanted to find the yield for a 4-year bond, a reasonable guess would have been an interest rate halfway between the 3-year bond and the 5-year bond. In December 2021, this would have been an annualized yield of  $(0.97\% + 1.26\%)/2 \approx 1.12\%$ . (This is *not* exact, as you can guess by noticing that the yield curve looks concave.)

(Omitted fig)

As notation for the annualized horizon-dependent interest rates, we continue using our earlier method. We call the two-year annualized interest rate  $r_2$  (here, 0.73%), the three-year annualized interest rate  $r_3$  (here, 0.97%), and so on. It is always these overlined-subscript yields that are graphed in yield curves. Let’s work with this particular yield curve, assuming it is based exclusively on zero-bonds, so you don’t have to worry about interim payments.

**Holding rates of return:** First, let’s figure out how much money you will have at maturity. That is, how much does an investment of \$500,000 in U.S. two-year notes (i.e., a loan to the U.S. government of \$500,000) on December 31, 2021, return on December 31, 2023? Use the data in Figure ?. Because the yield curve prints annualized rates of return, the total two-year holding rate of return (as in Formula ??) is the twice compounded annualized rate of return,

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**Nerdnote:** There are some small inaccuracies in my description of yield curve computations. My main simplification is that U.S. yield curves are based on semi-annually-compounded coupon bonds in real life, whereas our textbook pretends that the yield is \*quoted on a zero bond. In corporate finance, the yield difference between annual compounding and semi-annual compounding is almost always inconsequential. However, if you want to become a fixed-income trader, you should not take our approximation literally. You should consult a dedicated fixed-income text instead.

(Omitted eq)

so your \$500,000 will turn into

(Omitted eq)

on December 31, 2023. (In the real world, rounding errors might be different and you might have to pay a commission to arrange this transaction, so you would end up with a little less.)

What if you invest \$500,000 into 30-year Treasuries? Your 30-year holding rate of return is

(Omitted eq)

Thus, an investment of  $C_0 = \$500,000$  in December 2021 will return  $C_{30} \approx \$879,418$  in December 2051.

**Forward rates of return:** Second, let's figure out what the yield curve in December 2021 implied about the 1-year interest rate from December 2022 to December 2023. This would be best named  $r_{1,2}$  (or if you are a masochist or bond trader,  $r_{12/31/2022,12/31/2023}$ ). It is an interest rate that begins in one year and ends in two years. As already mentioned, this is called the *forward interest rate* or simply the *forward rate*.

The 1-year annualized interest rate is  $r_1 = 0.39\%$ . The two-year annualized rate of return is  $r_2 = 0.73\%$ . You already know that you can work out the two holding rates of return,  $r_{0,1} = 0.39\%$  and  $r_{0,2} = (1 + r_2)^2 - 1 \approx 1.465\%$ . You only need to use the compounding formula to determine  $r_{1,2}$ :

(Omitted eq)

Note that this forward rate  $r_{1,2}$  is higher than both  $r_1$  (0.39%) and  $r_2$  (0.73%) from which you computed it.

(Omitted tbl)

Table ?? summarizes our two-year calculations, and extends them by another year. (This helps you to check your results in an exercise below.) One question you should ask yourself is whether I use so many subscripts in the notation just because I enjoy torturing you. The answer is an emphatic no: The subscripts are there for good reason. When you look at Table ??, for example, you have to distinguish between the following:

- the three holding rates of return,  $r_{0,t}$  (0.39%, 1.47%, and 2.94%)
- the three annualized rates of return,  $r_t$  (0.39%, 0.73%, and 0.97%)
- the three individual annual rates of return  $r_{t-1,t}$  (0.39%, 1.07%, and 1.46%), where the second and third forward rates begin at different moments in the future.

In real life, you have not just three yearly Treasuries, but many Treasuries anywhere between 1 day and 30 years. Anyone dealing with Treasuries (or any other fixed-income investment) that can have different maturities or start in the future must be prepared to suffer double subscripts.

If Treasuries offer different annualized rates of return over different horizons, do corporate projects have to do so, too? Almost surely yes. If nothing else, they compete with Treasury bonds for investors' money. And just like Treasury bonds, many corporate projects do not begin immediately, but may take a year or more to prepare. Such project rates of return are essentially forward rates of return. Double subscripts — Yikes 🤯! Sometimes there is no way out of painful notation in the real world!

(Omitted solvenow)

## Bond Payoffs and Your Investment Horizon

Should there be a link between your personal investment horizon and the kinds of bonds you may be holding? Let's say that you want to buy a three-year zero-coupon bond because it offers 0.97%, which is more than the 0.39% that a 1-year zero-coupon bond offers — but you also know that you will want to consume in one year. Can you still buy the longer-term bond? There is good news and bad news. The good news is that the answer is yes: There is really no link between the point in time when your three-year bond pays off and when you want to get your money back (and spend it). You can always buy a three-year bond today, and sell it before maturity, such as next year when it will have become a two-year bond. The bad news is that in our perfect and certain market, this investment strategy will still only get you the 0.39% that the 1-year bond offers. If you buy \$100 of the three-year bond for  $P = \$100/1.0097^3 \approx \$97.15$  today, next year it will be a two-year bond with an interest rate of 1.07% in the first year and 1.46% in the second year (both worked out in Table ??). You will be able to sell the remaining two-year bond next year for a price of

(Omitted eq)

Your 1-year holding rate of return would therefore be only  $(P_1 - P_0)/P_0 = (\$97.52 - \$97.15)/\$97.15 \approx 0.39\%$  — the same rate of return (subject to some rounding error in our calculations) that you would have received if you had bought a 1-year bond to begin with. There is no free lunch here.

## The Effect of Interest Rate Changes on Different-Term Bonds

Are long-term bonds riskier than short-term bonds? Recall that repayment is no less certain with long-term Treasury bonds than short-term Treasury notes. (This would be an issue of concern if you were to evaluate corporate projects that can go bankrupt. Long-term corporate bonds are often riskier than short-term corporate bonds — most firms are unlikely to go bankrupt this week, but more likely to go bankrupt over a multidecade time horizon.) So, for Treasury bonds, as long as Congress does not go crazy and simply refuse to authorize repayment, there should be no uncertainty as far as payment is concerned. But there may still be some interim risk of a different kind; and even though we have not yet fully covered it, you can still intuitively figure out why this is so. Ask yourself how economy-wide bond prices (interest rates) can change in the interim (before maturity). What are the effects of sudden interest rate changes before maturity on bond values? It turns out that an equal-sized interest rate movement can be much more dramatic for long-term bonds than for short-term bonds. Let me illustrate why.

**The 30-year bond:** Work out the value of a \$1,000 promise 30-year zero-bond at the 1.90% interest rate prevailing.

It costs  $\$1,000/1.0190^{30} \approx \$568.56$ . You already know that when prevailing interest rates go up, the prices of outstanding bonds drop and you will lose money. For example, if annualized interest rates increase by 10 basis points, from 1.90% to 2.00%, the bond value decreases to  $\$1,000/1.020^{30} \approx \$552.08$ . If they decrease by 10 basis points from 1.90% to 1.80%, the bond value increases to  $\$1,000/1.0180^{30} \approx \$585.55$ . Thus, the effect of a 10-basis-point change in the prevailing 30-year *annualized* yield induces an immediate percent change (an instant rate of return) in the value  $V$  of your bond of

(Omitted eq)



So for every \$1 million you invest in 30-year bonds, you expose yourself to about \$30,000 in instant risk for every 10-basis-point yield change in the economy.

**The 1-year note:** To keep the example identical, let's now assume that the 1-year note also has an interest rate of 1.90% and let's consider the same 10-basis-point change in the prevailing interest rate. In this case, the equivalent computations for the value of a 1-year note are \$982.32 at 1.80%, \$981.35 at 1.90%, and \$980.39 at 2.00%. Therefore, the equivalent instant rates of return are

(Omitted eq)

For every \$1 million you invest in 1-year notes, you expose yourself to about \$1,000 in instant risk for every 10-basis-point yield change in the economy.

It follows that the value effect of an *equal-sized* change in prevailing interest rates is more severe for longer-term bonds. In turn, it follows that if the bond is due tomorrow, interest rate changes can usually wreak very little havoc. You will be able to get your money back tomorrow and you can then either consume or reinvest at whatever the new rate will then be. A long-term bond, on the other hand, may lose (or gain) a lot of value.

In sum, you should always remember that Treasury bonds are risk-free in the sense that they cannot default (fail to return the promised payments), but they are risky in the sense that interim interest changes can alter their values. Only the most short-term Treasury bills (say, due overnight) can truly be considered risk-free — virtually everything else suffers (interim) interest-rate change risk.

### **Begin Important**

Though “fixed income,” even Treasuries do not guarantee a “fixed rate of return” over horizons shorter than their maturities. Day to day, long-term Treasury bonds are generally riskier investments than short-term Treasury bills, because interest-rate changes have more impact on them. **End Important**

Confession time: I have pulled two cheap tricks on you. First, in the real world, what if short-term, economy-wide interest rates typically experienced yield shifts of plus or minus 100 basis points, while long-term, economy-wide interest rates never budged? If this were true, long-term bonds could even be safer than short-term bonds. However, the empirical evidence suggests that day-to-day changes of both yields were of similar magnitude — about plus or minus 3-7 basis points a day. Second, I ignored that between today and tomorrow, you would also earn 1 day of interest. However, this is a small amount for a 30-year bond. (For a 1-day bond, it is everything.)

(Omitted solvenow)

## A Tragic Error: “Paper Losses”?!

If you really need cash from a bond investment in 20 years, doesn't a prevailing interest rate increase cause only an interim paper loss? This is a capital logical error many investors commit. Say that a 10-basis-point increase happened overnight, and you had invested \$1 million yesterday. You would have lost \$30,000 of your net worth in 1 day! Put differently, waiting 1 day would have saved you \$30,000 or allowed you to buy the same item for \$30,000 less. “On paper” is actual wealth. Thinking “paper losses” are any different from actual losses is a common but capital error.<sup>3</sup>sect:introtaxesTax treatment of realized and unrealized capital gains (The only exception to this rule is that realized gains and losses have different tax implications than unrealized gains and losses.) Avoiding this conceptual mistake is more important than learning any formulas in this book.

### Begin Important

“Paper losses” are no less real than realized losses. **End Important**

## 5.4 Corporate Term-Varying Costs of Capital

Now that you understand that the yield curve is usually upward-sloping for a good reason, you should recognize the family resemblance: Corporate projects are offering cash flows, just like Treasury bonds. Thus, it should not surprise you that longer-term projects tend to have to offer higher rates of return than shorter-term projects. And just because a longer-term project offers a higher expected rate of return does not necessarily mean that it has a higher NPV. Conversely, just because shorter-term borrowing allows firms to pay a lower expected rate of return does not necessarily mean that this creates value. (Neither firms nor the U.S. Treasury rely exclusively on short-term borrowing.) Paying a higher expected rate of return for longer-term obligations is (usually) a fact of life. **Begin**

### Important

Even in a perfect market without uncertainty:

- The appropriate cost of capital (rate of return) should usually depend on how long-term the project is.
- The term structure is usually upward-sloping. Short-term corporate projects usually have lower costs of capital than long-term projects.
- Conversely, corporations usually face lower costs of capital (expected rates of return offered to creditors) if they borrow short term rather than long term.

The difference between long-term and short-term rates is called the Term Premium (sometimes time premium..

### End Important

Let me give you a short preview now. In Chapter , you will learn about the CAPM. The CAPM is perhaps the most common model used to discount future cash flows in NPV applications today. It is a model that relates your project's required expected rate of return to its risk. In practice, the CAPM allows you to use higher (risk-free) rates

of return for cash flows farther in the future. Thus, the CAPM has one term that is (more or less reflective of) the term-premium and one extra term for a risk-premium. In this sense, it can be viewed as a generalization of the point of this chapter that longer-term projects usually require higher (opportunity) costs of capital. If the second term is zero, then all you have left is the term premium — which is why I had to drag you through this chapter. You have to understand different rates of return over different time horizons.

It turns out that the first term (the term premium) has worked much better than the second (the risk premium). Thus, in real life, it is often more important for you to understand this chapter than the CAPM chapter (except perhaps in job interviews, where recruiters grill students routinely about their CAPM understanding). You usually need to take care of the fact that you need to increase your cost-of-capital estimate for longer-term cash flows.

Alas, there is one second-order complication: the term-premium for corporate cash flows can be higher than the term-premium for Treasuries. However, the two are often similar. That is, if a 20-year Treasury offers an expected rate of return that is 2% higher than that of a 1-year Treasury, you can often guess that a corporate cash flow in 20 years should offer an expected rate of return that is also (at least) about 2% higher than a corporate 1-year cash flow. Furthermore, if you need to estimate the appropriate discount rate more accurately, it is not difficult to repeat everything we did in this chapter but with a yield-curve based on risky bonds, such as high-yield corporate bonds. All the concepts remain the same.

(The second-order corrections for risk within the term structure curve depend on much deeper, more difficult, and harder-to-prove reasoning and will most likely gross up or shade down the Treasury spread only by a little bit. But we have to move on.)

## Summary

This chapter covered the following major points:

- Different horizon investments can offer different rates of return. This phenomenon is often called time-varying rates of return.
- The general formula for compounding works just as well for time-varying rates of return as it does for time-constant rates of return. You only lose the ability to exponentiate (one plus the 1-year rate of return) when you want to compute multiyear rates of return.
- A holding rate of return can be annualized for easier interpretation.
- The graph of annualized interest rates as a function of maturity is called the “term structure of interest rates” or the “yield curve.”
- The yield curve is usually upward-sloping. However, no law of finance is violated if it is downward-sloping (inverted), humped, or flat.
- Net present value also works just as well for time-varying interest rates. You merely need to use the appropriate rate of return as the opportunity cost of capital in the denominator.
- An important side observation: “Paper losses” are no different from real losses.

- Inflation is the process by which money will buy fewer goods in the future than it does today. If contracts are inflation-indexed in a perfect market, inflation is irrelevant. This is rarely the case.
- The relationship between nominal interest rates, real interest rates, and inflation rates is  
(Omitted eq)
- Unlike nominal interest rates, real interest rates can — and often have been — negative.
- In NPV, you can either discount real cash flows with real interest rates, or discount nominal cash flows with nominal interest rates. The latter is usually more convenient.
- TIPS are Treasury bonds that protect against future inflation. Short-term bond buyers are also less exposed to inflation rate changes than long-term bond buyers.
- Higher long-term interest rates could be due either to expectations of higher future interest rates or to extra required compensation for investors willing to hold longer-term bonds. The empirical evidence suggests that historically the latter has been the more important factor.
- Corporations should realize that corporate project cash flows need to be discounted with specific costs of capital that may depend on when the cash flows will come due. It is not unusual that cash flows in the more distant future require higher discount rates.

## Preview of the Chapter Appendix in the Companion

The web appendix to this chapter explains

- how you can translate the yield curve (in Table ??) step by step into forward and total holding rates of return.
- how shorting works in the real world, and how you can lock in a future interest rate today with clever bond transactions today.
- (again) how the “duration” of bonds helps you measure when you receive your cash flows on average.
- continuous compounding, which is a different way of quoting interest rates.
- the fact that Treasury notes and bonds are not really zero bonds (as we pretended in this chapter) but coupon bonds, and why this rarely matters in a corporate context. True Treasury zero bonds are called STRIPS.

## A Appendix: Why Does the Yield Curve Usually Slope Upward?

Aren't you wondering *why* the yield curve is not usually flat? Take our example yield curve from December 2021. Why did the 30-year Treasury bonds pay 1.90% per year, while the one-month Treasury bills paid only 0.06% per year? And why is the upward slope the most common shape?

First, let's look at the historical data. We cannot easily visualize the entire historical yield curve in a two-dimensional graph, but we can plot the historical yields on the short-term 3-month Treasury and, say, the 20-year Treasury. Figure ?? shows that the spread between them ranged from negative (though usually only briefly) to about 300 bps per year. (Humped shapes are rare, so if the long-term rate is below the short-term rate, the yield curve is most likely inverted.) The plot shows that inverted shapes occurred often just before a recession. After the Great Recession of 2008-9, the Fed kept short-term rates close to zero, which

resulted in unusually large spreads to the long-term Treasury. Long-term rates were coming down slowly, and eventually both met at around 3%. *And then Covid hit!* The Fed again pushed short-term interest rates down to zero, and the long-term rate was behind it, more slowly trailing down, too.

(Omitted fig)

To understand these dynamics better, let's work with a simpler two-year example. Let's say that the yield curve tells you that the 1-year rate is  $r_1 = 5\%$  and the two-year rate is  $r_2 = 10\%$ . You can work out that the 1-year forward rate is then  $r_{1,2} \approx 15.24\%$ . There are really only two possible explanations:

1. The 1-year interest rate next year will be higher than the 5% that it is today. Indeed, maybe next year's 1-year interest rate will be the 15.24% that it would be in a perfect world with perfect certainty. In equation form, is it the case that  $(1 + r_{1,2}) \cdot (1 + E(r_{2,3})) = (1 + r_{1,3})$ , so  $E(r_{2,3}) = (1 + r_{1,3}) / (1 + r_{1,2}) - 1$ ? (I am using "E" as an abbreviation for "expected" — which you will learn about in the next chapter.)
2. Investors tend to earn higher rates of return holding long-term bonds than they do holding short-term bonds. For example, if the yield curve were to remain at exactly the same shape next year, then a \$100 investment in consecutive 1-year bonds would give you interest of only about \$10.25, while the same investment in two-year bonds would give you (on average) \$21. Is  $E(r_{2,3}) < (1 + r_{1,3}) / (1 + r_{1,2}) - 1$ ?

In other words, the question is whether higher long-term interest rates today predict higher interest rates in the future, or whether they offer extra compensation for investors willing to hold longer-term bonds. Let's consider two possible variants of each of these two possibilities.

## Does the Yield Curve Predict Higher Future Inflation?

In general, demand and supply do not mean that *real* rates of return need to be positive. Indeed, the real rate of return has often been negative, but the alternative of storing nominal money under the mattress is even worse. Nevertheless, when inflation is higher, you would typically expect investors to demand higher nominal rates of return. Their alternative is to consume the money immediately, and more investors will do so as the inflation rate rises and makes future cash less valuable in real terms.

Therefore, you would expect nominal interest rates to go up when inflation rate expectations are going up. Similarly, you would usually (but not always) expect nominal rates to go down when inflation rate expectations are going down. However, this also need not be the case. For an extreme example, short-term inflation in late 2021 had shot up to 7% per annum (primarily but not only due to the logistics mess caused by Covid), and yet nominal Treasury interest rates remained under 2% for all maturities. The real rate of return was decidedly negative — and more so for shorter maturities.

Therefore, our first potential explanation for an upward-sloping yield curve is that investors believe that cash will be worth progressively less in the more distant future. That is, even though you will be able to earn higher interest rates over the long run, you may also believe that the inflation rate will increase from today's rate. Because inflation erodes the value of higher interest rates, interest rates should then be higher in the future just to compensate you for the lesser value of money in the future. Of course, this argument would apply only to a yield curve computed from Treasury debt that pays off in nominal terms. It should not apply to any bond payoffs that are inflation-indexed.

Fortunately, since 1997 the Treasury has been selling bonds that are inflation-indexed. These bond contracts are written so that they pay out the promised interest rate plus the CPI inflation rate. They are called Treasury Inflation Protected Securities (TIPS), or sometimes just CPI bond[CPI bonds]. By definition, they should not be affected by inflation in a perfect market. If the nominal yield curve is upward-sloping because of higher future inflation rates, then a TIPS-based real yield curve should not be upward-sloping.

(Omitted anecdote)

Conveniently, the [Treasury website](#) also shows a TIPS-based yield curve. The annualized TIPS rates were

Maturity	5-year	7-year	10-year	20-year	30-year
TIPS Interest Rate	−1.61%	−1.31%	−1.04%	−0.63%	−0.44%

Recall that for small figures, the difference between the nominal and the real rate is about the inflation rate.<sup>1</sup> Adjusting Inflation The following is an excellent approximation:

Maturity	5-year	7-year	10-year	20-year	30-year
Ordinary Treasury Bonds	1.26%	1.44%	1.52%	1.94%	1.90%
TIPS Interest Rate	−1.61%	−1.31%	−1.04%	−0.63%	−0.44%
Implied Breakeven Inflation	2.87%	2.75%	2.56%	2.57%	2.34%

Without going into more details, the implied inflation rate contains not only an expectation of future inflation but also a little bit of risk compensation, too, and more for longer-term projects. So we have to be a little careful. It is better to view the implied inflation rate as an upper bound, not as a pure inflation expectation estimate.

The markets did not expect the inflation rate to stay at the end-of-2021 rate of over 7% per annum. Instead, they probably expected inflation over the next few years to return to around 2.5%. Comparing short-term vs long-term rates on both TIPS and nominal yields shows that the TIPS slope was steeper (−1.17% vs. 0.64%). This is somewhat unusual compared to the past. Thus, it is hard to tell whether inflation expectation could account for the entire nominal yield-curve slope. Throughout most of history, they couldn't. Here, in 2021, depending on the risk-premium, they actually could.

(Omitted solvenow)

### Does The Yield Curve Predict Higher Future Interest Rates?

A closely related possibility is that the yield curve is typically upward-sloping because short-term interest rates will be higher in the future. This is more generic than the previous explanation — higher future interest rates need not be caused by higher future inflation expectations. Maybe the 30-year yield of 1.90% was much higher than the 1-year yield of 0.39% because investors expected the 1-year interest rate in 2051 to be even higher than 1.9% (the forward rate,  $r_{29,30}$ ). (Recall that the 30-year yield is “sort of an average” of all 1-year interest rates.) But this does not tell you *why* investors would expect interest rates to be so much higher in 2051 than in 2021 — maybe they expect that capital will be more scarce in the future and investment opportunities will be better — but I can speculate for you about this even if I am not sure about the reason.

Unfortunately, markets do not give us direct estimates of future interest rates the way they gave us direct estimates of future inflation rates (from TIPS). Therefore, investigating this hypothesis requires looking at many years of evidence to learn whether future interest rates were well predicted by prevailing forward rates. The details are beyond our scope. However, I can tell you the

punchline: Expectations of higher future rates of return have historically not been the reason why the yield curve was typically upward-sloping (except maybe at the very short end of the yield curve, say, for interest rates that are for cash investments for less than 1 month).

## Does The Yield Curve Identify Bargains?

If it is not the case that future interest rates are higher when forward rates are higher, it means that we are dealing with the second possible reason: time horizons. On average, investors must have earned more in long-term bonds than in rolled-over short-term bonds. The empirical data confirms that you would have ended up historically with more money if you had bought 30-year bonds than if you had bought and rolled over one-month bonds every month for 30 years. So why were long-term bonds better investments than short-term bonds?

One reason why this may have been the case is the habitat theory: Different type of investors may prefer only particular types of bonds, to the point that different-maturity bond markets are segmented. Such individual preferences are called “[habitats](#).” The fact that there are habitats may well be true, but it is not so clear why long-term bond investors would then be so scarce that they would require more compensation, while short-term bond investors would be so abundant that bills could be sold for higher prices. And if this were the only reason, then why would borrowers (like the U.S. Treasury) not always prefer to sell short-term bonds for higher prices instead? And why would other investors not try to step in and get rich (by “arbitraging” the difference)? This explanation does not seem very plausible.

Maybe the yield curve was upward-sloping because short-term investors were stupid. In this case, you might conclude that the 30-year bond offering 1.90% was a much better deal than the 1-year bond offering 0.39%. Alas, investor stupidity seems just as unlikely a good explanation. The market for Treasury bond investments is close to perfect in the sense that we have used the definition. It is very competitive. If there were a great deal to be had, thousands of traders would have immediately jumped on it. More likely, the interest rate differential does not overthrow the old tried-and-true axiom, *You get what you pay for*. It is just a fact of life that investments for which the payments are tied down to occur in 30 years must offer higher interest rates now in order to entice investors — for some good reason yet to be identified by a future finance trader or professor (you?).

We have not discussed imperfect market problems yet. However, beside the fact that the Treasury market is the most highly competitive market in the world, I can’t even see conceptually how they could matter. In particular, taxes cannot be the reason for why short-term bills are higher priced (offer lower yields) than long-term bonds. This is because investors in both short-term and long-term bonds have to pay the same tax rate. More money pre-tax is also more money post-tax. Similarly, liquidity considerations cannot be responsible. Consumption is *not* tied down to the maturity of the bond, because you can, of course, sell your bond tomorrow to another investor if you so desire. Thus, short-term bonds do not offer their owners more instant liquidity than long-term bonds.

## Does It Compensate Investors For Risk?

If it isn’t market stupidity that allows you to earn more money in long-term bonds than in rolled-over short-term bonds, then what else could it be? The empirical evidence suggests that it is most likely the phenomenon explained in Section ??]sect:tbondriskBond Risk: Interim changes in prevailing interest rates have much more impact on long-term bonds than they have on short-term bonds. Recall that rolling over short-term bonds insulates you from the risk that interest rates will change in the future. If you hold a one-day bond and interest rates double by tomorrow, you can just purchase more bonds tomorrow that will offer you twice the interest rate. In contrast, if you hold a long-term bond, you could lose your shirt if interest rates go up in the future. With long-term bonds usually being riskier than short-term bonds, investors presumably would want to buy them only

if they get some extra rate of return for the extra risk. Otherwise, they would prefer rolling short bonds. Thus, long-term bonds need to offer investors more return on average than short-term bonds.

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